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ABSTRACT

The interplay that exists between the mass media and political activity provides the topic for this report of an informal dialogue between William R. Carmack, from the University of Oklahoma, and Joseph S. Foote, press secretary to Carl Albert, Speaker of the House of Representatives. The first section of the report relates Carmack's opening statement dealing with the reciprocal nature of mass media and politics in which he asserted that the impact of the media on politicians and politics has had five effects: politicians must be consistent on issues, the balance of exposure between incumbents and those seeking office has been somewhat regulated, candidates have been forced to confront one another directly in debate, glamor has been highlighted at the expense of issues, and candidates can sometimes grandstand for the press. Carmack also stated that politics and politicians have affected the media through increased government control of mass communication, the growth of editorial reporting, and the birth of investigative reporting. The second section of the report presents the subsequent dialogue that developed between Carmack, Foote, and members of the audience. (MAI)

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MASS COMMUNICATION AND POLITICS: A PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

William R. Carmack and Joseph S. Foote

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MASS COMMUNICATION AND POLITICS: A PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

William R. Carmack and Joseph S. Foote*

Introductory Note

The purpose of this session was to provide a practical insight regarding the interplay between mass media of communication and political activity. Mr. Carmack made an opening statement followed by a question and answer period consisting of an informal dialogue between Carmack, Foote, and members of the audience in response to questions from the audience. The verbatim transcript of the question and answer session is quite lengthy and will not be reproduced in its entirety in this report. In addition, a number of questions were of limited and local interest. Therefore, this report of the discussion will highlight several questions from the floor which were of general interest and seemed to stimulate the most audience reaction.

Carmack's Opening Statement

I would like first to introduce to you Joe Foote, who is Press Secretary to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Carl Albert of Oklahoma. Joe came from Washington to be with us today and I know that you are as grateful as I am for it. I am going to try to keep my remarks brief, because I think Joe's experiences bring to focus numerous perspectives on the role of mass communication in politics. Obviously, he has practical insights on what politicians can and cannot do in making effective use of the media both in reference to conduct in office and reelection campaigning. Joe also worked in the print and broadcast media for a number of years and can accommodate both practical perspectives of the politician and the political reporter. In addition, he has the perspective of graduate study in mass communication.

I would like to touch briefly on the reciprocal nature of the mass media and politics. First, I propose to raise several considerations involving the impact of the media on politics and politicians, and secondly, I would like to reverse the coin and consider the impact of politics and political institutions on the media.

Traditionally, politicians have been characterized as individuals who are prepared to "tell the people what they want to hear." In recent decades with the advent of expensive national media coverage this strategy has become virtually impossible. The instantaneous exposure of major candidates

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to wide and uncontrolled audiences via the print and electronic media has forced consistency on those who campaign for major offices. In campaigns at the national and even state level it is virtually impossible for a candidate to modify substantially a previously publicized position on an issue. Although in prepared remarks he may choose to exclude locally controversial issues, he is always vulnerable to the probing process of the press conference which since President Truman has been a significant dimension of public campaigning. In the context of the give and take of a public press conference it is difficult for any political figure or candidate to submit a prepared statement without a probing of the ambiguities contained within it.

A second impact of the media on contemporary politics involves the problem of the balance of exposure between incumbents and those seeking public office. Some years ago, as Secretary to the Senate, Bobby Baker articulated the so-called Baker Rule: the chances of winning an election against an incumbent are 95% against 5%. He had reference, of course, to the distinction between news and advertising. A president or a well-known member of the Congress can at will command time and space in the mass media for his political pronouncements. The thin line between his responsibility to report to his constituency and to enlighten the general public on the one hand and his desire to promulgate his campaign issues on the other hand is a difficult one. As a public figure he is, per se, newsworthy. On the other hand a candidate running for office, particularly at the early stage of his campaign, may not be newsworthy. His access to the media may well rest on a cash basis. This issue has been of concern to such regulatory agencies as the Federal Communication Commission, and the equal time provision and the like may modify this somewhat. However, the impact of this phenomenon is still heavy in American politics and should be of serious concern to persons interested in the role of the media in politics.

The famous Nixon-Kennedy debate introduced a new aspect to public campaigning. The media now make virtually mandatory direct personal confrontations between candidates for major office. Questionnaires circulated by such groups as the League of Women Voters are widely distributed even in local elections and television debates are becoming almost necessary in national political confrontations. This is bringing a demise to the old political adage, "Never speak to the opponent's crowd." Due primarily to pressures from an aggressive reporting of campaigns, candidates for significant offices are virtually forced to confront each other and the same issues in a public forum.

Most of us would view the three impacts of the media that I have suggested as laudable. I would like to mention two that may have negative consequences in some instances.

The extensive television coverage of national political figures has tended to highlight glamour sometimes at the expense of issues. Although most Americans who viewed the famous Nixon-Kennedy debate have forgotten where the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu are, most recall that Mr. Nixon lacked adequate professional facial make-up and wore a shirt with the collar too large. This kind of "in your living room" exposure may have become as effective a determiner of voting behavior as basic issue identification.

Related to this is the extensive expansion in both print and electronic media of what is called investigate reporting. A number of journalists have locked themselves into a situation in which they must produce on a daily basis

"inside stories" on prominent political figures. This can range from serious consideration of their basic philosophy to frivolous details regarding their private lives. On one occasion that I recall an angry United States Senator called Robert Novak of the Novak and Evans column called to complain that they should be published in the society section rather than on the editorial page of the newspaper. His concern centered around a casual remark he had made at a cocktail party in the hearing of one or another of the columnists who was there as a guest and who used it. It is probably true that most serious readers of the Washington Post read the newspaper from the front page, to the editorial page, to the society page, where much of the "hard" news is reported. It is an increasingly serious issue in political coverage to determine what is real news and what is not.

An additional possibly adverse affect on the expanded role of the media in political affairs involves the temptation available to well publicized national figures to grandstand for television and the press. Oftentimes a serious congressional inquiry loses much of its original purpose under the temptation of members involved to cast themselves in the role of performers rather than legislators. Perhaps the extreme example of this would be the celebrated hearings conducted on television by the late Senator Joseph McCarthy. More recently the public was captivated by the proceedings of the Watergate hearings themselves, but I feel certain partially also because of the theatrical surroundings of the hearings. Senators previously little known nationally gained almost Hollywood celebrity status by hours and days of national exposure on television.

Let me turn to three aspects of the impact of politics and political institutions on the media.

As most students of mass communication are well aware, there is an increasing tendency on the part of the government to exercise control on mass communication. The powers of the Federal Communication Commission are virtually absolute in the broadcast industry. The FCC stands in relation to practical politics in a somewhat quasi-judicial role, not highly sensitive to the winds of political change. Recently it has extended its authority to cable television without specific legislative mandate and the controversy which will probably finally be adjudicated in the courts centers around the propriety of that jurisdiction. An issue of concern to students of mass communication revolves around the relationship between mandatory federal control of the broadcast media and freedom of speech. The print media operating from an entirely different economic and political rationale have escaped the extensive regulations characteristic of broadcasting. Other than specific litigation involving defamation, obscenity, or the like, the revocation of a second class mailing permit is the basic governmental sanction against printed communication.

More than political institutions, politicians themselves have impacted substantially on the mass media in the United States. A century ago it was entirely common for newspapers to publish editorial endorsements of candidates together with invectives against their opponents that today would be viewed as libelous. From that we retreated to a more sterile and modest concept of "objective" reporting. It appears to me that we are returning gradually to the concept of editorial reporting in which the media take a specific position on not only issues but also on candidates as individuals. Any candidate for local, state, or national office is at great pains to solicit public endorsements in the form of favorable editorial recommendations by newspapers, radio and television stations. For a number of years this sort of endorsement was viewed as critical to success by candidates for public office.

In the 1950's with the advent of the "two-step" flow of communication research, politicians and advertisers felt for a short time liberated from the demands of media sanction. As we all know, further investigation suggested that the mass media, while not usually responsible for attitude change in a simplistic sense, perform a vital function in the decision making process of the electorate. They provide needed information to "opinion leaders" and, in addition, they provide motivation and reinforcement to partisans who, while in support of a particular candidate, might, with appropriate media coverage and encouragement, translate that nominal support into aggressive campaign activity.

A final impact of politics and politicians on media behavior has already been suggested -- investigative reporting. A number of incumbents in high office would undoubtedly, if given the choice, roll the clock back to a happier time when their private lives were their own. This is no longer possible today. As honorous a burden as this may be for seekers of public office and those who hold public office, it is probably of even more concern to their press secretaries.

This is an appropriate time to pause and ask for comments and questions from the audience to our distinguished guest, Press Secretary Mr. Foote, or me.

Foote: You said candidates can no longer tailor their messages to particular constituencies?

Carmack: That's an overstatement perhaps. In some rare markets, there is still enough unity in a neighborhood that you can modify your presentation. I don't think that means contradict. It's just that you can bring up things of specific concern there that you would not be asked about elsewhere. If you were asked that across town, you'd say the same thing; you just are not likely to be asked.

Joe's boss (Carl Albert) is a Rhodes scholar, a brilliant man, known as the intellectual of the House. He comes from a rural district in Oklahoma, known as Little Dixie, with high unemployment and a high welfare ratio. Joe, does he tailor his career and issue stands to his constituents?

Foote: Well, he's got an interesting philosophy. He does not communicate with his constituents extensively on issues. He has run for Congress for 30 years and been elected without an opponent all except the first year -- he won 95% of the vote. He does not stress newsletters, press releases, local television coverage, or campaign commercials. He has chosen to stress communication at a personal level, on the street. They've met him, can identify with him and feel that whatever he is doing, he must be doing it to help them. They have confidence in him and understand the fact that his voting record on issues may not coincide with their own.

Question: Does he ever wrestle with the intellectual honesty of this? Because he's liberal and has a conservative constituency?

Foote: His constituents seem to rationalize it as something he has to do and believes he really agrees with them.

Carmack: It's my theory that the concern for issue identification decreases as influence and capacity to help the district increases. In other words, no matter what he says on the issues, people say "we can't afford to lose this kind of power."

Maybe we should say "issue" in quotes because there are different kinds of issues. The questions of a new reservoir or federal building in the district are all "issues," and everyone agrees on those. Ideological issues are what we are talking about but these are not what are of most concern to the district.

Foote: Another good example of this is a Congressman from Missouri. He has the same kind of district--very conservative--and he's a liberal. He's taken the opposite stance. He's developed a TV program which he takes around and broadcasts and tries to communicate with his constituents on the issues, educating them to the liberal view. This costs considerable money each month. He needs a communications van and a 50-man crew, so he doesn't do it every month.

Question: The key seems to be whether the constituents trust you.

Carmack: I think Ralph Yarborough is another example of a problem in this area. He would not have reflected what a Gallup poll would say were issues of most concern in Texas even when he was still popular as a Senator. But in my view he lost an election more by neglect than on critical issues. He was probably one of the hardest working members of Congress I've ever seen. He was fully informed on the issues and could make a better spontaneous speech than most members could get from their staffs. Many people think he lost simply because people no longer thought of him as a Texan -- he spent so much time in Washington, working and keeping up with things.

Question: There were actually two issues in that race -- the support of the prayer amendment and the support for the war in Vietnam.

Carmack: It's important to distinguish between critical and non-critical issues. There are issues on which you will forgive a person even if you disagree with him and then are "gut" issues -- critical issues. And those were that kind of issue.

Question: Is there some point at which if you double-talk the issues, people will stop trusting you?

Foote: It depends on how strong you are in other areas. Such as personal contact and communication.

Question: What are the characteristics of a campaign style which is effective on the personal level?

Foote: Mr. Albert, for instance, is a strong orator and effective in small groups and as a public speaker. But he does not have as much confidence in himself on TV, although you use some of the same kinds of techniques, the conversational style. He does a much better job than he realizes. It's amazing how wary politicians are of radio and TV. This is why they'll spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for consultants. They just don't have any confidence but really it's just an extension of face-to-face.

When the President made a speech last January 13, the White House paid $80,000 for CBS to set up a camera and crew so the President could rehearse for a week. They also rented a teleprompter for $5000. Then they called the networks at 4:30 in the afternoon and asked for time to make the speech that very night, although he's been rehearsing for a week. He reached 80 million people. The next day the Speaker of the House asked for radio time and was turned down by CBS. Finally, the networks gave some time for him to respond and they brought in just a couple of minicameras, poor lighting, etc. He reached 18 million people.

Question: Do we need legislation to correct this kind of imbalance?

Foote: Not legislation. Perhaps pressure on the networks.

Question: Who paid for the rehearsal of the President's speech?

Foote: You did. It was tax money.

Question: Do we need legislation to make it tit-for-tat?

Foote: I've proposed something here: "If the network decides to grant live simultaneous radio-tv time to either the chief constitutional officer of the Executive branch, the President, or the chief constitutional officer of the Lesiglative branch, the Speaker, the network shall make time available to the other constitutional officer or his representative for a response."

Question: The networks really are very powerful? They really are a third state?

Foote: They do have an awfully lot of power. I don't see how you can run against the President of the U.S. -- with the free time and exposure he gets.

Carmack: I think that leads to another point -- the advantage of any incumbent bears discussion.

Foote: One interesting point. Just 3 weeks ago the House of Representatives authorized each congressman money from the national treasury for 2 newsletters to communicate with constituents.

Carmack: Imagine the cost to the taxpayers of mailing a newsletter in New York. That used to be a campaign expense.

Foote: Soon they'll be authorizing payment of television programs for the congressmen.

Question: Would you comment on the impacts of the new campaign spending regulations in this regard?

Foote: Well, it's been called the Incumbents Campaign Finance law. It limits the challenger while the government subsidizes the incumbent. On the one hand, the congressman does need to communicate with his constituents. On the other hand, there's the possibility of great abuse.

Question: How good a job do the media do of interpreting the role of Congress vis-a-vis the President? For instance, if I've heard once I've heard a thousand times that we have a "do-nothing Democratic Congress" in Washington.

Foote: I think people need a lot of education about the nature of Congress. Many do not even know who their own congressman is and lots do not even know what the make-up of Congress is. Congress seems to be held in low esteem, but people do not seem to hold each individual accountable for the whole. A congressman individually is able to run against Congress as a whole. On the other hand, if the President loses in the polls, it hurts him individually. But Congress is an amorphous group.

Question: Many historians and political scientists seem concerned with this problem of imbalance. Can you make any concrete suggestions for dealing with this power of the President in order to help protect our democracy?

Carmack: For one thing, Congress ought to arm itself with something remotely resembling the investigative and rhetorical strength of the executive. I used to appear before the committees on budget for the Bureau of Indian Affairs--we had computers, back-up experts in each area and so on. Congressmen may have only one staff member to work on and brief him on all the various budget requests. This leads to an unequal encounter.

Question: To what extent do candidates for political office knowingly use theories of mass communication?

Carmack: For a number of years, I suspect, we have imposed our theoretical models and constructs post hoc. Most successful politicians of an earlier time must have been surprised at their own acumen upon reading the account by academicians of their campaign strategies. Today, however, anyone campaigning for major office is likely to be fully knowledgeable about basic persuasion or diffusion theory, if not personally, then through his campaign staff and advertising agency. In most states of any size candidates for office require the services of a professional advertising agency, which has available to it the information we utilize in the academic market place. In states like California, it is completely impossible to contemplate a one-to-one handshaking campaign. Politicians are reliant upon well-planned, highly coordinated and sophisticated use of the media. Political figures no longer rely simply upon paid advertising. For example, Governor Askew credits his famous walk through Florida as a major factor in his election. He was combining a form of personal contact with a newsworthy event. It is extremely difficult to distinguish in the real life situation between the so-called interpersonal approach to political campaigning and the use of the media.